

WASHINGTON GRADE SCHOOL
199 Bridge Street
Vernonia
Columbia County
Oregon

HABS OR-193
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
PACIFIC WEST REGIONAL OFFICE
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1111 Jackson Street, Suite 700
Oakland, CA 94607

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY WASHINGTON GRADE SCHOOL

HABS No. OR-193

Location:

Washington Grade School is located at 199 Bridge Street, Vernonia, Oregon 97064, in Columbia County Oregon. The school is located at latitude: 45.858297, longitude: -123.186856. The coordinate was taken from the Google Earth website accessed on April 7, 2011 with the marker located centrally on the building's roof. Google Earth uses WGS84 datum and the accuracy of the coordinates is estimated at +/- 30 meters. The Washington Grade School location has no restriction on its release to the public.

Vernonia is a town of approximately 2,250 residents about 45 miles northwest of Portland.¹ The Vernonia School District 47J campus includes the following buildings and structures: Washington Grade School (K-5); Vernonia Middle School, Vernonia High School, the District Headquarters building, High School Shop building, Maintenance Building, stadium, a covered play ground, and a ticket kiosk. Some temporary modular buildings are also present since the 2007 flood event. The campus consists of about twenty-two acres. The primary buildings, including Washington Grade School, face north towards Bridge Street. The confluence of Rock Creek and the Nehalem River is about 500' south of the property line. The proximity of these streams to the campus has made the school buildings vulnerable to flooding.

Significance:

The Washington Grade School has been determined individually eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria C. The building embodies the distinctive characteristics of a school building designed in the Georgian classical mode from the Colonial Revival period of architecture (1910-1935). It is the most ornate example known of the school buildings designed by F. Marion Stokes in Oregon. The Arts and Crafts tiles and cast stone elements express high artistic value and the built-in bleacher system is an exquisite example of Craftsmen design. The building retains its architectural integrity, and is in fair condition.

Description:

The Washington Grade School was built in 1930. It was designed by architect Francis Marion Stokes of Stokes Zeller Company in the classical Georgian mode of Colonial Revival architecture, common between 1910 and 1935. The building also displays some Jacobethan elements such as decorative brick embellishments and eaveless gables with checkered friezes. In 1950 Stokes & Allyn designed a classroom addition that is in detailed accordance with the original. The building is one story with a daylit basement, and constructed of brick supported by a poured reinforced concrete basement foundation and an interior structural system of posts on footings. The building is finished with extruded red brick and cast-stone trim. Embellishments include panels inset with header-bricks, colored tile belt courses, and terra cotta cartouches with scrolled heraldic designs. The Georgian style is expressed in the symmetrical composition of each elevation, the horizontal alignment of the windows set in symmetrical ranks, and the combination of hipped and gabled volumes.

The façade is symmetrical on a bilateral axis and consists of a hipped-roof administrative block flanked

¹ Population from the City of Vernonia website, <http://www.vernonia-or.gov/government/welcome.asp> accessed April 7, 2011.

by horizontally massed classroom wings. The grand entry complex features a broad staircase with a robust concrete rail that leads to a landing at the recessed entry doorway. An elaborate terra cotta round-headed door surround reflects Jacobethan influence, and is decorated with colored tile, pilasters with twist-incised cast stone columns capped with classical entablatures. The pilaster imposts at the vestibule have an 'open book' motif in cast stone. The colored tiles alternate blue and orange. The central entry gable is visually supported by scrolled brackets in an acanthus leaf motif. The frieze at the gable is a belt course of polychrome tile decorated with Arts and Crafts motifs including figures on horseback, Viking ships, flowers, pastoral scenes and geometric patterns. The entablature of the hipped portion consists of terra cotta panels with a repeated Lantern of Knowledge motif that is a common decoration of Colonial Revival school buildings during this period. A corbel course supports the galvanized rain gutter. The entrance is lit by a pair of lanterns made of an iron strap framework set with colored glass panels. A single pendant fixture lights the main door. A brass plaque at the entry is inscribed with the date of construction, the names of the board of directors, the contractor, David Alm, and the architect, F. Marion Stokes.

The building is composed of well defined horizontally massed rectilinear blocks set in a finger plan with the classroom wings on the outside, and the administrative volume and gym/auditorium in the center. The volumes are hip-roofed with wall gables at the public entrances. The public elevations of the two classroom wings are balanced in composition with window openings aligned horizontally in rows. Each features a prominent entrance within a gable set with polychrome Arts and Crafts tiles in a checker pattern at the frieze. The entry doors have round-headed arch transoms and multipane lights.

The main floor has 17 classrooms, a gym/auditorium, a lobby, two offices, a teacher's room, a library and lavatories for boys and girls. The wall finishes on the main floor include Craftsman style simple moldings of stained and varnished fir planks in about 3-inch widths that are used in the corridors as wainscot cap, door and window moldings, and trim around fire hose cabinets and bulletin boards. Bas-relief cartouches of scrolled heraldry are set above the auditorium doors. The corridors originally had wood floors, and the classrooms asphalt tile flooring. The corridor floors are now covered with carpet.

The original plans called for classroom built-ins to include bookshelves, glass-doored display shelves, supply shelves, pigeon holes, drawers, cabinets and student wardrobe spaces. Classrooms had blackboards with tack board above, finished in some places with a map rail. Some of these elements are extant, though many have been removed.

The auditorium/gym is a rectangularly-massed volume that exhibits finish details of both classical and Craftsman modes. The space is a typical gym/auditorium of the era, and is spanned with a truss system encapsulated in the attic. Bleachers are situated at the back (north) wall and a performance stage and its wings fill the southernmost portion of this space. The gym floor is a painted basketball court. Basketball hoops are attached to the side walls, and a digital electronic scoreboard is suspended from the ceiling. The stage and surround exhibit classical motifs. The proscenium is a Tudor arch flanked with cartouches of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. The stage footlights are housed in a trough under a hatch at the front of the stage. The trough is lined with bright-tin and set with colored lights. Decorative wood panels are set below the stage apron, which has a subtle bow outwards. The walls of the auditorium are clad in stained and varnished wainscot that is installed to the height of a typical plate rail, about six feet.

The built-in bleachers are an excellent example of the Craftsman style of design and a distinguishing feature of the school building. The bleachers are constructed of stained and varnished fir set in seven tiers of seats with plank backrests. Each of the three sets of bleachers has boxed half-walls that are clad in wainscot. The rooms under the bleachers are used for storage.

The basement plans drawn by F.M. Stokes show that the basement rooms under the classroom wings are labeled 'girls playroom' and a 'boys playroom.' A kitchen, cafeteria and boys and girls locker rooms are in the central area. These spaces were indicated as 'unfinished' according to the original finish schedule in the plans. The basement finish schedule indicated that originally the basement had no baseboard or wainscot, the ceiling and walls were unfinished, and the floor was concrete. At present, there is some wainscot in the partition walls, and plaster board has been installed, but not painted. The boiler room and fuel room is at the very back of the central volume accessed by a tin-lined door.

A 1950 or 1951 addition was made to the easternmost wing of the building, designed by Stokes & Allyn Architects. The addition created two new generously-sized classrooms and extended the central corridor to the south, using the same materials, details, and window pattern as found in the original building. The most significant alteration to the building since that time was the replacement of the original multipane double-hung wood-sash windows with vinyl windows with various sash configurations, which occurred in the 1990s. The window openings were not altered. The main entry doors and doorways on the back elevation retain their multipane lights, side lights and transoms. Other significant alterations include the installation of wall board that replaced damaged finishes after the flood events. The corridor and some of the classroom floors have been covered with carpeting. Some of the original built-in cabinets and features have been removed. The original flagpole and its polygonal base has been removed, and a raised square cement pad marks its original location.

Foundation plantings consist of columnar evergreens flanking the entry stairs, and rhododendron and dwarf spruce planted in intermittent groupings along the facade. Flowering plum trees are planted in a row on the planting strip. A mature cottonwood is on the west side of the front lawn. On the east a small lawn separates the building from a sidewalk and parking lot. The west side and back (south) sides of the building are playgrounds covered in asphalt. Posts for the basketball hoops line the back edge of the playground. Beyond the playground is a multipurpose playing field.

History:

The Washington Grade School was built in 1930 and has been in continuous use to the present. In the early to mid-1920s the town of Vernonia had experienced a population boom due to the establishment and success of the Oregon-American Mill.² When the mill was built, it was the largest all-electric sawmill in the world.³ There were two elementary schools in the 1920s, the old Washington Grade School that was built in 1913 and the Lincoln Grade School built in 1923 to accommodate the influx of students that came with the development of the mill. The company preferred to hire married men, and constructed 66 residences to accommodate the new families. Many of the new men and their families came from the south, but there were also contingents of Japanese workers, Filipinos, and Hindus.⁴ The mill and its related railroading operations had become a major economic force developing the old growth timberlands in the vicinity during the 1920s through the 1950s. By 1929, a grade school was operating in the main logging camp (Camp McGregor) outside of town, and another grade school was needed within Vernonia as well.⁵

In 1930 the old Washington Grade School was torn down, and the new Washington Grade School was built on the site. Parts of the old building were salvaged and incorporated into the Natal Grange Hall in Vernonia. The new school building was designed by F.M. Stokes of Stokes-Zeller Company. Initially the

² Ann Fulton, *Vernonia: Pocket in the Woods* (Portland, OR: Portland State University, 1997), 27

³ B. Wayne Rhoades, "End of an Era: Vernonia's railroad passes into history," *The Oregonian*, 31 May 1974, 22.

⁴ Edward J. Kamholz, Jim Blain, and Greg Kamholz, *The Oregon-American Lumber Company: Ain't No More* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 86.

⁵ *Ibid*, 102.

cost was to be \$75,000. However the final cost was \$90,000.⁶ The Washington Grade School may have been the second school in Vernonia designed by this architectural firm. Eight years prior, Stokes and Zeller probably designed the Lincoln Grade School, which exhibits characteristics common to buildings by F.M. Stokes. Another possible Stokes design for a store and theater building in Vernonia is alluded to in a 1931 newspaper article, but the building is unknown.⁷

Architect Francis Marion Stokes practiced architecture in Oregon for 50 years, and was the son of William Stokes, an architect and builder. William Stokes came to Portland from Ohio in about 1882, and entered into the contracting business with Richard L. Zeller. F. Marion Stokes worked for the company while a teenager, and after he graduated from Oregon Agricultural College in Corvallis in 1906, he returned to work for his father as a clerk. By 1915 William Stokes retired, and F. Marion Stokes became president of the company. Under his leadership, the company changed its emphasis from contracting to providing more sophisticated design services. Richard Zeller was no longer part of the practice after 1922 (though the firm kept the name until 1937). After World War II F. Marion Stokes partnered with Frederick Allyn, and formed Stokes & Allyn, which continued until 1958.⁸ According to Ritz, Stokes designed numerous grade and high schools in towns around Portland and on the Oregon coast.⁹ The Clackamas County Courthouse constructed in 1937 is also attributed to Stokes, and exhibits a formal façade with brick exterior with cast stone embellishments in a classical mode. Stokes designed primarily in revival styles such as Spanish Revival, Tudor Revival, or Georgian Revival, but by the mid-1930s he was also adept in the Art Deco or Moderne style, as seen in the design of the Williams and Company Building in Portland.¹⁰ F. Marion Stokes died at the age of 91, in 1975.

The Washington Grade School is the most ornate example of any known extant school building designed by F. Marion Stokes, and it is in the most original condition. The State of Oregon Historic database lists Francis Marion Stokes as architect for several residences, a Masonic Hall, the St. Johns Post Office and five school buildings. The St. Johns Post Office and the Francis Marion Stokes Fourplex are on the National Register of Historic Places. The school buildings are Scott Hall at Hillcrest Youth Correction facility in Salem, Central School in Newberg, Fairview School in Fairview, Union High School in Hillsboro (demolished) and the Tualatin Grade School (demolished). The Tualatin Grade School had a similar floor plan as the Washington Grade School, including built-in bleachers (Stokes 1939). These school buildings and the Lincoln Grade School building in Vernonia were designed with some of the same architectural elements as are found in the Washington Grade School: The walls are faced with brick, the buildings have similar floor plans, express one of the Colonial Revival styles; and are one-story with a prominent daylight basement. The Washington Grade School has continued in use as an elementary school since it was constructed.

⁶ *Oregon Journal* 10 November 1929 and *The Oregonian* 20 October 1929, 26.

⁷ *The Oregonian*, published as *Morning Oregonian*, 31 March 1931, 9. In the article, Stokes is mentioned as the architect of the building which had been constructed, but not according to specifications, according to a lawsuit.

⁸ Richard Ellison Ritz, *Architects of Oregon; A Biographical Dictionary of Architects Deceased- 19th and 20th centuries* (Portland, OR: Lair Hill, 2003), 373.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Gideon Bosker and Lena Lencek, *Frozen Music: A History of Portland Architecture* (Portland, OR: Western Imprints, The Press of the Oregon Historical Society, 1985), 150-52.

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1930 Plans of the Washington Grade School, Sheets 1-3.

1950 Washington Grade School Addition, as-built plans.

1939 Plans for the Tualatin Grade School, on file Oregon State Preservation Office

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Database:

Oregon State Preservation Office; Historic Resource Database and files.

Historians:

Melissa Darby, Historian, 2010-2011

Kristen Minor, Historic Architect, 2011

Project Information: HABS Documentation was prepared by the following individuals:

Melissa Darby and Kristen Minor, research and historical report.

Harold Hutchinson, large-format and 35-mm digital photography.

Kristen Minor, 35-mm digital photography.